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ABSTRACT

Extension community resource development (CRD) is primarily public affairs education at the local level, dealing with local issues. Two methods of public policy education are the advocacy model which picks two people with opposing views on a subject and lets them debate the issue, and the public policy education process which provides all relevant information so that alternative solutions can be proposed and their consequences assessed. The public policy education process involves five steps: identifying the problem; developing alternative solutions; analyzing the consequences of the alternatives; choosing an alternative; and evaluating. This process can be entered at any point in the sequence. However, the earlier the process is entered, the more likely a positive contribution will be, and the more likely that one's participation will be met with more widespread approval. This process can be utilized when formulating decisions pertaining to the distribution of costs and benefits associated with community growth. The process model ignores the notion of gainers versus losers and concentrates on the problem. This publication discusses the public policy process model as it is used in Cooperative Extension and how it relates to CRD work in general and to community growth issues in particular. (NQA)

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# Coping with Growth

# The Public Policy Process:

## its role in community growth

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Extension Economist,
Washington State University

WREP 23 August 1979

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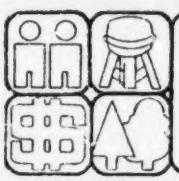

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# Coping with Growth

# The Public Policy Process:

## its role in community growth

**Bruce Florea,**
**Extension Economist,**
**Washington State University**

**WREP 23** **August 1979**

I know
no safe depository
of the ultimate powers
of the society but the
people themselves;

and if we think them
not enlightened enough
to exercise their control
with a wholesome discretion,

the remedy is not
to take it from them, but
to inform their discretion
by education.

Thomas Jefferson
In a letter to
William Charles Jarvis,
September 28, 1820

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The objective of this publication is to discuss the public policy process model as it is used in Cooperative Extension—how it relates to Community Resource Development (CRD) work in general and to community growth issues in particular.

The following discussion describes the nature of the public policy process:

> A human affair becomes a public affair when the consequences of an act by an individual or group of people go beyond the person or persons directly involved *and* when there is an effort by others to influence those consequences. The resolution of a public affair is usually a public policy—a settled course of action adopted and followed by the public to achieve certain goals. Public policy is implemented by means of public laws, programs or institutions.[1]

Note that two conditions are required for a private affair to become a public affair. First, there must be "third party" effects, or in economists' terms, "externalities" or "spillover effects." Second, there must be an effort by others to influence these effects.

## Public Affairs Education

Much of what is identified as Extension CRD work is public affairs education at the local level, dealing with local issues. Two characteristics of public affairs education make it quite different from the more traditional areas of Extension, such as agriculture, family living, and youth work.

These characteristics are:

- There is never sufficient information to clearly indicate a solution; therefore, decisions are based upon inadequate information.
- Public affairs are controversial, with at least two differing points of view.

These traits are so common that public affairs can almost be defined in terms of them.

Most Extension professionals dispense advice to their clients based upon sufficient research to indicate highly probable results. Moreover, most Extension professionals are trained in the physical sciences, where

[1] *Public Affairs Education.* Report of the Cooperative Extension Service Committee on Policy, October, 1969, p. 2.

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laboratory techniques can exclude a lot of troublesome, irrelevant variables. Public affairs, on the other hand, deals with people, and that immediately shifts the focus to the social sciences. Psychology, sociology, political science, and economics are much less precise and far less predictable than the physical sciences because they deal with human behavior.

As with Extension professionals, most planners, engineers, and others who are involved in planning for community growth are trained in the physical sciences and experienced with the technical side of the planning process—layout, design, and physical specifications. Thus, in both training and experience they, too, are ill-equipped to deal with the economic, political, and social impacts associated with growth. It follows, then, that most Extension workers as well as local planning officials might benefit substantially from exposure to the social science aspects of the public policy education process model. Its potential contribution to growth management will be further explored in this publication.

Most Extension workers are more experienced in answering questions rather than raising them—which is more typical of policy work. They know the proper temperature to can tomatoes; they know the optimal amount of fertilizer to apply to a field of wheat; they know how to formulate a least-cost, balanced ration to feed a lactating dairy cow.

But in public affairs their greatest contribution may be merely to assist clientele in framing the proper questions; or in helping them think through where to seek the answers to their questions. Again, the contrast is obvious. For the professional it requires quite a different role—utilizing a different set of tools. For many, this amounts to plowing totally new ground, and thereby introduces a degree of risk not found in traditional Extension programs—a risk that one might fail, or that one might not receive audience support, or that traditional supporters of Extension might misunderstand or perhaps even be offended. It is important that these risks be recognized, and they should not be glossed over. A number of people question the relevance or effectiveness of Extension's public process. Still others question whether Extension should become involved in this area in the first place.

In the face of the foregoing, however, it is the position of this paper that the case for Extension involvement in public affairs education is clear and overwhelming.

## The Advocacy Model

There are essentially two methods of public policy education. One method—the advocacy model—is to pick two people who hold opposing views on a subject, and let them have at it. An outstanding example of this style is an excellent public television program called "The Advocates." The format is essentially that of a court of law. Our political process follows this model; candidates are expected to take stands on controversial issues, and they are voted up or down, depending upon how well their views reflect those of the voters in their constituancies.

The advocacy model of public resolution, because of its long history in the courts and in the political system in this country, is widely recognized and readily accepted. It receives attention because it is showy, and with the proper performers, can be quite dramatic. And perhaps, of most importance, it forces a solution. Court cases and elections have one thing in common: They always produce a winner and a loser. One way or another, the issue gets resolved.

## The Process Model

The alternative to the advocacy model is the public policy education process. It has evolved over a period of years as a result of a pioneer group of Extension workers struggling along with various client groups to help them deal with a variety of public problems. After considerable experience in conducting these types of programs, it was discovered that they all had in common a series of identifiable steps. It was the identification of this stepwise sequence that ultimately came to be known among Extension workers as the public policy education process. There are five steps involved:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Develop alternative solutions.
3. Analyze the consequences of the alternatives.
4. Choose an alternative.
5. Evaluate.

Extension workers can contribute a great deal in the *problem identification* stage and bring a different perspective to bear on the issue by simply raising pertinent questions. It is surprising how often the originally perceived problem turns out not to be the real problem at all!

*Develop alternative solutions.* Here again, Extension workers can help—if not personally, by knowing where assistance can be obtained.

*Analyzing the likely consequences* of the proposed alternatives is another point at which Extension can contribute either directly or acting as a broker to identify assistance.

*Choose an alternative.* This is the point at which the people themselves—and by themselves—must exercise their judgment. The word "judgment" cannot be overemphasized, for that is exactly what it is. We never have all the facts needed. The problem has been identified; alternative solutions have been developed; and *likely* consequences have been carefully assessed based upon the best evidence available. But that body of evidence is never sufficient to indicate that, clearly and unmistakably, the correct alternative has been chosen.

Parallel to our argument that Extension workers should not attempt to influence public policy is a basic tenant of the democratic form of government—that decisions should be made by those who will bear the consequences. Extension's value as an educational institution is destroyed if it becomes an advocate. The public policy process model depends for its success on the Extension professional's ability to work with all sides of an issue. This requires a particularly strong commitment to integrity, scrupulousness, and objectivity.

The last phase is *evaluation.* Here Extension can again make a contribution in assisting with objective evaluation of the alternatives chosen by the citizens of the community.

A five-step process has been described. It is important to note that it may be entered at any point in that sequence. But it is usually true that the earlier the process is entered, the more likely a positive contribution will be, and the more likely that one's participation will be met with more widespread approval. With most public issues, there is a time for education; later, when the controversy is sharp enough and deeply felt, a power struggle may ensue before the issue can finally be resolved. When that stage is reached—when the trenches are dug and the guns are aimed—the opportunity for education has passed.

# Community Growth: costs and benefits

With all community growth issues, there are costs and there are benefits. New housing developments create wealth in a community by virtue of their existence. They add to the tax base and therefore contribute to local government and schools, which derive much of their income from property tax revenues. But such developments also create costs. New streets have to be laid out and surfaced; new sewer and water lines have to be dug; perhaps new wells must be drilled; additions to an existing sewage treatment plant may be required. These costs and benefits can be estimated with an acceptable degree of accuracy, and can thus be compared. Most of us prefer to see the benefit side exceed the costs.

But there is another element of equal importance, and it is around this point that most of the battles of growth management are joined. This issue is the distribution of costs and benefits associated with community growth. Who bears the costs? Who reaps the benefits?

It seems to be characteristic of most growth management issues that the potential gains are concentrated among fewer individuals and/or organizations than are the losses. The losses, therefore, are spread over a greater number of organizations and/or individuals, with each loser tending to lose less than each gainer is likely to gain. In some instances, the stakes can be quite high, indeed.

The net result is that in the advocacy model (probably the one being followed), information supporting the cause of the gainers is more likely to be sought and used than is information about the losers' position. It may be useful to observe that in the advocacy model, in the interest of fairness, both sides should have relatively equal resources to develop information supportive of their positions. Because of the relative costs involved in obtaining information and the relative payoffs, data supporting the case of the gainers often tends to outweigh that of the losers.

Herein lies the genius of the process model: it ignores the notion of gainers versus losers. It concentrates on the problem—gathers all useful and relevant information so that alternative solutions can be proposed and their likely consequences assessed. At this point the professional withdraws, only to rejoin the process once again when it comes time to activate the choice made by the decisionmakers, and subsequently to evaluate.

# Extension's Role

Recall the two public policy models discussed herein: the advocacy model and the process model. Most of the activity that takes place on community growth issues conforms to the advocacy model—the public hearings of planning commissions, boards of review, city councils, and boards of county commissioners follow this model. In fact, of all those who are likely to become involved, Extension may stand alone in using the process model. This may not make Extension's task any easier—but it does make it all the more important. As a matter of fact, the lack of knowledge about this process on the part of other public agencies and institutions can, under certain conditions, lead to somewhat strained relations between Cooperative Extension and other interests and agencies.

For example, a county planning department may seek Extension's help in acquiring public input for a comprehensive plan. The planning department may expect Extension, as a cooperating public agency, to become an advocate of the planning department's position in its public presentations. When the Extension presentation describes this position as well as opposing positions — and when that presentation involves the assessment of the consequences of these various options—the planning staff may come close to feeling betrayed. Strained relations between the two agencies can easily result.

In most instances such difficulties can be avoided if agencies who seek the assistance of Cooperative Extension are carefully appraised of the public policy process model, and reminded that the basic mission of Extension is education. In this case, education of an electorate means that viable options are developed and likely consequences are assessed. The final decision must be reserved for those who will bear the consequences of that course of action—the people themselves.

Most USDA agencies understand this process and Cooperative Extension's role because they have worked closely with Extension over a long period of time. It may be quite a different story, however, with many state agencies, units of local government, and citizen organizations of one kind or another.

If meaningful public participation is the goal, the policy process must be introduced in the early stages of the growth management process. At this point, positions have not been publicly announced or solidified and people have not yet made up their minds on issues. In short, the educational process at this time still has a reasonable chance of contributing to a cooperative decision.

On the other hand, if public participation is viewed only as a token exercise, citizen involvement in the process will vanish.

The risks associated with public policy development are real; they are substantial, and they must be squarely faced. At the same time, the rewards can be highly gratifying when people become aware that there is in their midst an educational organization—Cooperative Extension or otherwise—that can make a material and objective contribution toward the resolution of public issues of vital concern to their community.

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This publication is part of the "Coping with Growth" series produced by the Western Rural Development Center. Other titles in the series include:

- Evaluating Fiscal Impact Studies: Community Guidelines
- Minimizing Public Costs of Residential Growth
- Coping with Rapid Growth: A Community Perspective
- Citizen Involvement Strategies in Community Growth Issues
- Interagency Coordination and Rapid Community Growth
- Economic Multipliers: Can a Rural Community Use Them?
- Incoming Population: Where Will the People Live?
- Social and Cultural Impact Assessment
- Assessing Fiscal Impact of Rural Growth
- Growth Impacts on Public Service Expenditures
- Programming Capital Improvements
- Rapid Growth: Impacts on County Governments

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